

Poverty Priorities

Your group is a nonprofit agency serving those in poverty. Your clients are blessed to have access to an agency that can offer diverse services, but your agency is understaffed and underfunded. As a result, **only 8 clients per day can be served and no client can receive more than \$200 worth of services at a time.**

Yesterday, 15 clients submitted applications to your agency. Today your agency must **assess the clients' situations and distribute services to 8 of them.** The clients are:

1. 12-year-old illegal immigrant. Her mother paid to have her brought into the US for a better life, but the girl has no family or even family friends in the US. She has taken up with an older man who is suspected of being her pimp, but she won't speak about that part of her situation and hides from law enforcement and child welfare workers. Her situation is further complicated by language barriers.
2. 15-year-old male who was kicked out of his parent's home because he adopted a different religion (Pagan). He has been couch surfing, but no one has been able to feed him on a consistent basis. He has not been going to school and has not been able to get a job due to his appearance.
3. 17-year-old female who arrived on a bus to your town two weeks ago. Her parents told her they were sending her to live with relatives because they couldn't afford to care for her after they move to a new town. The address they provided for the relatives turned out to be the bus station. Her phone still works but her parents don't answer when she calls.
4. 19-year-old female who is living with the mother of her incarcerated boyfriend. The older woman physically and verbally abuses the younger woman. The client has no income and has not visited a doctor since she realized she was pregnant 8 months ago!
5. 23-year-old female. She's escaping an abusive relationship. She is staying in the domestic violence shelter but it is too far from work. She's afraid he'll kidnap her from work if she goes back.
6. 27-year-old single Iraq War vet who suffers from PTSD but won't take medication due to religious beliefs. Her mood swings frighten coworkers, so she rarely holds a job for more than a couple days or weeks if she can even find one.
7. 30-year-old female and 46-year-old male, recently married. When his employer learned that she became pregnant before he divorced his first wife, he was terminated. Between them, they have 4 sons under age 10. The family is living in a friend's home temporarily.
8. 34-year-old single mother with an 8-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son. They were evicted from their apartment on Monday and are living in their car now. The mother and both children have mental health issues. The mother refuses to work and has not applied for benefits because she "isn't one of those people". Her son is the one who actually applied for assistance.

9. 45-year-old female. She had been the caretaker for her terminally ill partner for nearly 15 years. She lost her job when the factory shut down. Due to the loss of income, they lost their home, car and most possessions. Medical bills burned through all the savings. When the house was foreclosed, the partner committed suicide. For the 3 past years, the client has squatted in abandoned houses and eaten whatever the nearest food bank handed out each week.
10. 47-year-old male and 42-year-old female. Though not married, they are a committed couple and have been homeless off and on for decades. Their backpacks with all of their belongings, including documentation, were stolen from their truck while they were eating at McDonald's. They paid for the meal from the change they were given by strangers in response to signs the couple hold as they stand on the side of the road most days. They are both unemployed, but employable.
11. 52-year-old woman. She had been living in her mother's house spending all her time caring for the Alzheimer's patient for several years. When her mother died, she learned that her mother had been swindled into a reverse mortgage by a grandson who had kept the money for himself; therefore, the home she had counted on was taken by the loan company per the terms of the reverse mortgage. The client works as an unlicensed home health aide off the books.
12. 54-year-old single father with 6 children under age 17. Their mother died from a heart attack last year, at which time family income fell by more than 50%. He has a full-time job and a part-time job that barely pay the bills. The landlord is constantly complaining about the children being home alone at all hours. If he quits either job, he won't have enough money for rent or food.
13. 55-year-old male. He had been living in the van he drove to his job at the landfill. The van broke down and was towed to an impound lot after the apparently abandoned van wasn't moved from the side of the road for 3 days. Now he has no place to live, no change of clothes, no access to his other personal property, and no transportation to get to work.
14. 62-year-old female. She's homeless but left the shelter after she got scabies there. She is paralyzed on the right side and uses a shopping cart to get around. Her right shoe and foot are abraded from being dragged as she tries to walk.
15. 64-year-old single street preacher who lost both legs in a drunk-driving wreck a decade ago. The combination of the DUI, disability, and medical bills has kept him from getting ahead. He receives "offerings" from those who listen to his sermons – some corners are more lucrative than others.

Limited Resources Your group can distribute each of these as many times as needed – unless limitations are noted – as long as the total per client does not exceed \$200:

- A. \$5 per week per person: Sports club/team membership, but he/she/they will need some sort of transportation to the club/field and home
- B. \$8 per person per day: Day's-worth of food, but every person in the family must get the same amount of food (family of 5 would be 5 x \$8=\$40; no skimping)
- C. \$10 per night: Women's shelter bed in a room for 4 women, minimum 18 years old. (Only two beds are available at this time.)
- D. \$10 per night: Shelter room with 2 full-size beds for a family of 3-4; no males over 13 allowed. (Only 1 shelter room for a family is available at this time.)
- E. \$10 gift card: Shoes – child or adult; casual, work or athletic
- F. \$10 pack: Diapers, jumbo pack (24-36 pieces depending on age)
- G. \$10 pass: Bus pass for a week, unlimited trips and transfers
- H. \$20 voucher: Clothing – complete used outfit in good condition, with new underwear and socks, but no shoes
- I. \$20 per 4'x4' plot per season: Membership in a community gardening program
- J. \$20 Shell gift card: Gasoline (but be careful, these can also be (mis)used for beer, cigarettes, junk food, etc.)
- K. \$20 kit: Family hygiene kit (not travel sizes) – shampoo, bar soap, toothpaste, 2 toothbrushes, deodorant, disposable razor, laundry detergent, package of 10 feminine hygiene pads
- L. \$40 per night, 3-night minimum: Motel room with 2 full-size beds and no cooking. (Only two rooms are available at this time; minimum 21 years old to sign contract)
- M. \$50 voucher per person per week: Child care (no requirement for each child in a family to be in child care)
- N. \$50 per hour: Mental health counseling
- O. \$50 child or \$75 adult: Refurbished bike and new helmet
- P. \$60 per visit: Medical appointment
- Q. \$60 voucher: Prescription medication
- R. \$75 utility assistance voucher: Water, gas, electricity (or combination)
- S. \$100 voucher: Vehicle repair or set of 4 used tires mounted
- T. \$100 voucher: Any other service not mentioned above – write it/them down (limited to \$400 total for the 8 clients).

Process

Break into groups of 3-6 people (it is highly desirable to assign each group to a separate room to minimize cross-group interruptions). If possible, assign one staff member or experienced volunteer per group to serve as an observer and to encourage quieter members to participate. Let each group decide how to tackle the problem. Provide each group member with the first 3 pages of this exercise (clients and resources).

At the end of 55 minutes, each group should have assigned benefits to at least 4 clients. By the end of 80 minutes, each group should have assigned benefits to all 8 clients. Allow each group 15 minutes to develop a short presentation and poster to represent the group's decisions. *We don't need to know the details about who got what, but rather the rationale of why anyone got anything and others didn't. It's also interesting to discuss any "aha" moments the group had or any creative applications of benefits.*

Presentation:

One or more presenters from each group will summarize the team's decisions. (3-5 minutes per team depending on the number of teams). Tape the posters on the wall.

Discussion:

After the groups have presented:

Note which of the 15 clients every group agreed had to receive resources ("all-in").

Note which of the 15 clients were not selected by any of the groups to receive resources ("all-out").

What assumptions did the groups make about the all-in or all-out clients' needs?

What personal beliefs within the groups or of individual group members influenced the decisions? (For example, opinions about unwed mothers)

How would the distribution strategy change if you could have served all 15 clients but each could have received only \$100 worth of services?

Would any of the clients that no group chose initially have been excluded in this scenario as well? What makes them so different?

Discuss how society often automatically (and unfairly) rules out the chronically homeless for services because they are seen as lost causes, but also rules out those who have middle-class backgrounds because they are expected to be more resilient/able to recover more quickly.

How do you feel about the limitations on the resources?

What can you do personally to improve the resources available to those in need?

Which scenario is preferable – more resources to fewer people OR fewer resources but everyone gets something?

Boards of directors and agency leaders often set policies to maximize impact. Promising more than the agency can deliver can ruin an agency's reputation.

Discuss how underfunding and understaffing – individually or combined – affect how effective an agency can be. The reality that only some clients can be served each day and that new clients seek services every day often builds a seemingly insurmountable backlog.

What kinds of client information would have been most useful for you to make better decisions?

We often have to make decisions without all the information we would like. Even though most agencies use some sort of application to gather the information they think they need, individual situations can be so different and unique that you can't possibly capture it all – at least not all of the time – especially since client intention and deception may come into play.

Ask the observers to discuss how the groups addressed the vetting of clients and distribution of resources.

Which was more important – the individual client's needs or the ability to provide the most services for the money?

What did you notice about your group's ability to function as a team?

Were there any directions the group could have received upfront that would have improved the team's functioning?

Additional Notes

This is ultimately a team-building exercise (similar to but more detailed than the lifeboat exercise), but also serves to provide some insight into the everyday operating frustrations many (perhaps most) agencies serving those in poverty experience.

If you know your participants well, you may want to assign members to groups to maximize diversity in each group. I intentionally distributed participants as equally as possible by the following: work site/geography, race, religious beliefs, socio-economic background (all of our VISTAs are college graduates, but education level might be relevant as well) – while also intentionally breaking up social groups/cliques to maximize focus on the work rather than side interests.